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Dated

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GB9918476.4

By virtue of a direction given under Section 30 of the Patents Act 1977, the application is proceeding in the name of

INTERNATIONAL ALUMINIUM HOLDINGS LIMITED
Unit 2, 2 Parbrooke Close
Torrington Avenue
COVENTRY
CV4 9XY
United Kingdom

Incorporated in the United Kingdom

[ADP No. 07888159002]

Request for grant of a patent

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1. Your reference

AJC/JG/JCB/P594

2. Patent application number

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9918476.4

3. Full name, address and postcode of the or of each applicant (*underline all surnames*)ARC KINETICS LTD.,
Unit 2 Parbrook Close, Torrington Avenue,
Coventry, CV4 9XY,Patents ADP number (*If you know it*)

If the applicant is a corporate body, give the country/state of its incorporation

United Kingdom

4. Title of the invention

WELDING APPARATUS AND METHOD

5. Name of your agent (*If you have one*)"Address for service" in the United Kingdom to which all correspondence should be sent (*including the postcode*)Withers & Rogers,
Goldings House,
2 Hays Lane,
LONDON. SE1 2HWPatents ADP number (*If you know it*)

00001776001

6. If you are declaring priority from one or more earlier patent applications, give the country and the date of filing of the or of each of these earlier applications and (*If you know it*) the or each application number

Country

Priority application number

Date of filing
(*day / month / year*)

7. If this application is divided or otherwise derived from an earlier UK application, give the number and the filing date of the earlier application

Number of earlier application

Date of filing
(*day / month / year*)

8. Is a statement of inventorship and of right to grant of a patent required in support of this request? (Answer 'Yes' if:

Yes

- a) any applicant named in part 3 is not an inventor, or
 - b) there is an inventor who is not named as an applicant, or
 - c) any named applicant is a corporate body.
- See note (d))*

Patents Form 1/77

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Description

Claim(s)

-

Abstract

-

Drawing(s)

3 + 3

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Priority documents

-

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Statement of inventorship and right to grant of a patent (Patents Form 7/77)

-

Request for preliminary examination and search (Patents Form 9/77)

-

Request for substantive examination (Patents Form 10/77)

-

Any other documents

-

(please specify)

11.

I/We request the grant of a patent on the basis of this application.

Signature Withers & Rogers

Date 5/8/99

12. Name and daytime telephone number of person to contact in the United Kingdom

Withers & Rogers
Tel: (01926) 336111

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Welding Apparatus and Method

The present invention relates welding and in particular to welding metals having a surface oxide layer such as, for example, aluminium alloy.

The high strength and low weight of aluminium alloy has traditionally lead to its use in areas where such factors are critical, for example in the aerospace industry. More recently it has begun to be used in the automotive industry as the material for vehicle bodies.

Difficulties exist in the welding of aluminium alloy due to its inherent nature. The high thermal conductivity of aluminium alloy ranges from three to five times that of steel, with the result that significantly higher inputs of energy are required to achieve fusion. For the welding of thick sections preheating of the work pieces may be necessary. Aluminium and its alloys have a surface film of aluminium oxide which forms rapidly when the aluminium is exposed to the atmosphere. It has been necessary to remove this oxide layer before welding as it prevents fusion between the work pieces. Oxide removal operations are time consuming and require a high degree of work piece cleanliness to be maintained if subsequent welding operations are to be successful. Magnesium and its alloys are also beginning to be considered for automotive applications. Like aluminium, magnesium also forms a surface oxide layer when exposed to the atmosphere.

These inherent problems with welding aluminium, magnesium and their alloys have thus far restricted their use in the automotive industry to top of the range vehicles and have necessitated the use of less desirable alternative joining methods such as riveting and adhesives.

According to a first aspect of the present invention there is provided a method of welding two or more overlapping members having a tenacious surface oxide layer, the method comprising the steps of:

melting said members at a predetermined location to form a weld pool;
supporting the weld pool from beneath; and
disturbing the weld pool.

The step of disturbing of the weld pool enables sufficient mixing of the molten metal of the work pieces to ensure fusion therebetween. In particular, the step of disturbing the weld pool serves to break down any layer of oxide in the weld pool which, if left undisturbed, would prevent fusion.

In a preferred embodiment the step of melting the members to form the weld pool is achieved by using a plasma arc torch. The method may include the step of clamping the overlapping members prior to forming the weld pool.

Disturbance of the weld pool may be achieved by introducing a disturbing member into the weld pool. In one embodiment the disturbing member may be consumable, for example a wire having a composition the same or similar to that of the metal forming the two or more members. In such an embodiment, the step of disturbing the weld pool may comprise the steps of advancing the disturbing member into the weld pool at a predetermined rate and to a predetermined depth, holding the disturbing member in the weld pool for a predetermined time, and then withdrawing the disturbing member at a predetermined rate. In an alternative embodiment the disturbing member may be non-consumable, for example a lance made from a material which is not wetted by the molten metal of the weld pool. The lance may be made from, for example platinum or a ceramic material. In such an alternative embodiment, the step of disturbing the weld pool may comprise the steps of advancing the lance into the weld pool at a predetermined rate and to a predetermined depth, and then withdrawing the lance.

According to a second aspect of the present invention there is provided a welding apparatus comprising a plasma arc torch operable to form a weld pool in a work piece, a support member for supporting a weld pool, and weld pool disturbing means operable, in use, to disturb a weld pool formed by the plasma arc torch.

The weld pool disturbing means preferably comprise a disturbing member which is movable into the weld pool. In one embodiment the disturbing member may be consumable, and comprise a wire or filament having a composition the same or similar to

that of the workpiece. In such an embodiment the wire or filament may be movable by a feed mechanism. The feed mechanism may be operable to move the wire or filament at one or more predetermined feed rates relative to the weld pool, in use. Preferably the feed mechanism includes guide means to guide the wire or filament to a predetermined location in the weld pool. In an alternative embodiment the disturbing means may be non-consumable, and comprise a lance or like implement. The lance is preferably made from a material which is not wetted by the molten metal of the weld pool.

The support member comprises a support surface having a recess adapted to support the weld pool. In a preferred embodiment the support member is adapted to allow the recess to vent when the weld pool is formed. The support surface may be provided with one or more open channels extending from the recess. Preferably the support member is provided with a cooling system. The support member may have a substantially hollow interior through which coolant can be circulated.

The plasma arc torch and support member may be movable relative to one another so as to enable the work piece to be clamped therebetween.

An embodiment of the present invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

Figure 1 shows cross-sectional side view of a welding apparatus in accordance with the present invention;

Figures 2a to 2c show diagrammatic side view of a welding operation according to the present invention; and

Figure 3 shows a perspective view of a support member according to the present invention.

Referring firstly to figure 1 there is shown a welding apparatus, generally designated 10, adapted to produce spot welds. The welding apparatus comprises a plasma arc welding torch 12 mounted on a movable carriage 14. The carriage 14 is movable within a cylinder 16, and an outer portion of the carriage 14 carries a peripheral seal 18 which enables the carriage 14 to act as a piston. The cylinder 16 is connected to a mounting bracket 20 via a

vibration absorbent compliance ring 22. The carriage 14 is movable relative to the cylinder 16 by the selective application of pneumatic pressure to the cylinder 16 via apertures 24,26 provided in the wall thereof. As can be readily seen, the apertures 24,26 are provided above and below the peripheral seal 18. A porting block 28 is provided adjacent the apertures 24,26 to enable connection of a suitable source of pneumatic pressure.

The constricting orifice 30 of the plasma torch 12 projects from the carriage 14 and is shrouded by a clamp cup 32 carried by the carriage 14. The clamp cup 32 is connected to the carriage 14 by a retaining ring 78. The clamp cup 30 serves, in use, both to clamp a work piece 34 and to ensure adequate gas shielding of the weld site. Both functions of the clamp cup 32 will be described in more detail below. The carriage 14 is provided with cooling channels 36 to allow the circulation of coolant to cool the plasma torch 12 when it is in operation. The plasma torch 12 is retained in the carriage 14 by a tubular retaining sheath 38. The sheath 38 also houses the gas and power connections 40,42 of the plasma torch 12.

A filler wire guide, generally designated 44, is connected to the carriage 14 by a support clamp 46. The wire guide 44 comprises a curved guide tube 48 containing a liner 50, and a tapered tip 52. In the embodiment shown the guide tube 48 passes through the mounting bracket 20. As guide tube 48 is connected to the movable carriage 14 by the support clamp 46, an insulated guide bush 54 is provided in the mounting bracket 20 to allow movement of the guide tube 48 therethrough. Filler wire 56 is movable through the wire guide 44 by an appropriate feed mechanism (not shown). Typically the filler wire is stored in the feed mechanism on a drum. The tip 52 of wire guide 44 is positioned so as to, in use, feed the filler wire 56 through an aperture 49 in the clamp cup 32.

A support member 58 is shown in figure 1 and also in greater detail in figure 3. The support member 58 has a support surface 60 against which the work piece 34 rests in use. The support member 58 has a substantially hollow interior into which coolant can be circulated via an inlet 62 and an outlet 63. A recess 64 is provided in the support surface 60 and two channels 66,68 extend in opposite directions from the recess 64 to the edge 70 of the support surface 60.

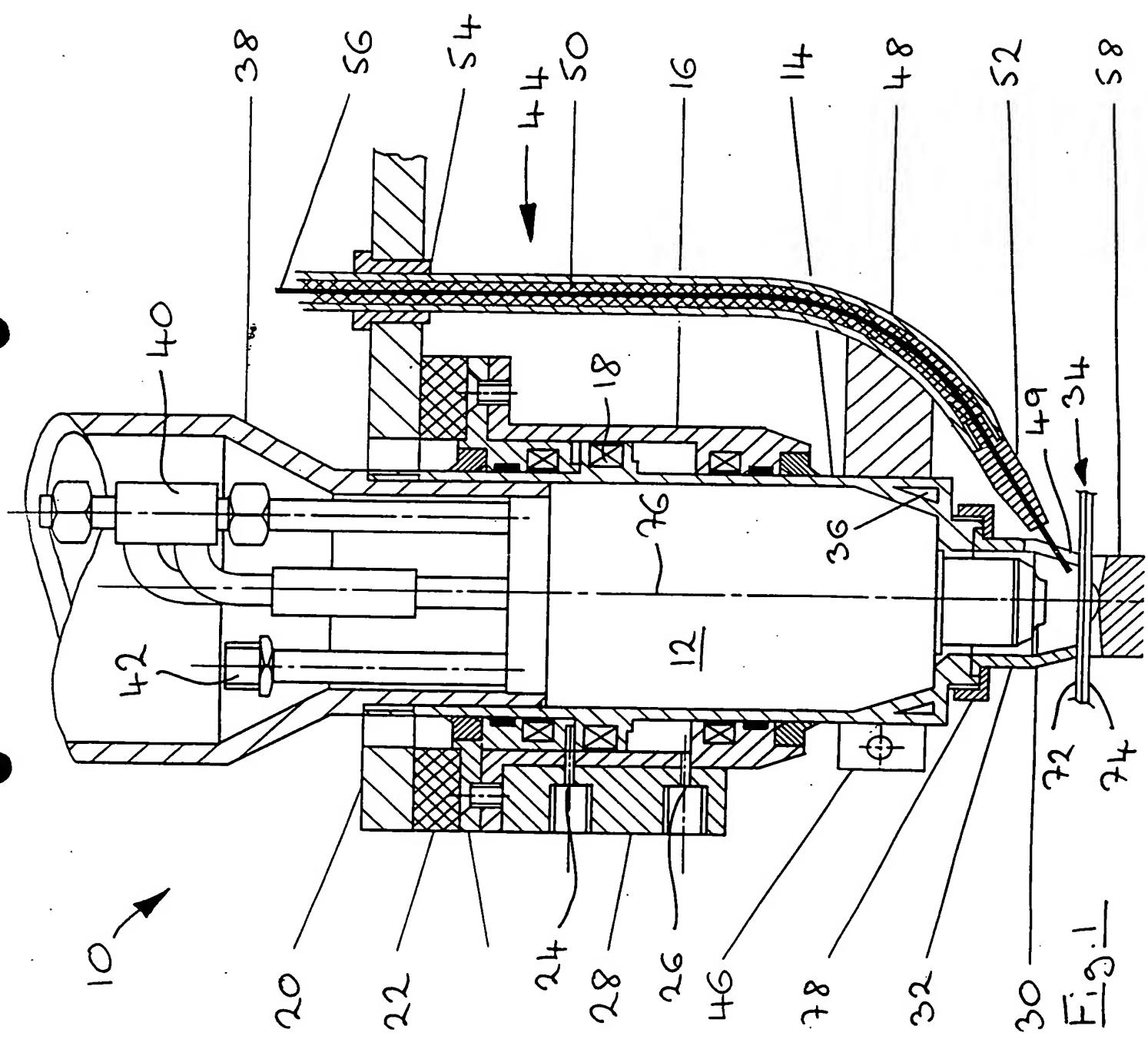
Operation of the welding apparatus 10 will now be described with reference to all of the figures. In the embodiment shown the workpiece 34 comprises two overlapping sheets 72,74 of aluminium alloy. The sheets 72,74 are positioned such that the intended position of the weld is aligned with a nominal axis 76 passing through the plasma torch 12 and the recess 64 in the support member 58 as shown in figure 1. The carriage 14 is lowered until the clamp cup 32 abuts the work piece 34, and the work piece 34 is clamped against the support member 58. This clamping action reduces the possibility of the sheets 72,74 moving relative to one another during the subsequent welding operation.

The welding torch 12 is then operated to produce localised melting of the work piece 34 to form a weld pool 80. The weld pool 80 is contained by the recess 64 of the support member 58 as shown in figure 2b. As the weld pool 80 forms air present in the recess 64, which expands due to the heating of the work piece 34, vents via the channels 66,68. Without the channels 66,68, the only means of escape for the expanding air would be through the molten weld pool 80 which could result in the weld pool 80 being blown from the recess 64. The channels 66,68 also provide a means of escape for surface coatings present on the lower surface of the workpiece 34, which coatings liquefy as a result of the formation of the weld pool 80. For example the work piece 34 may be provided with a protective surface coating of wax.

Once the weld pool 80 has formed, there exists a thin layer of aluminium oxide, shown by broken line 82 in figure 2b, between the molten metal of the respective sheets 72,74. This oxide layer 82 comprises the oxide present on the facng surfaces of each sheet 72,74. This prevents the mixing of the molten metal of the sheets 72,74, and hence prevents fusion. To overcome this, filler wire 56 is advanced into the weld pool 80 to disturb the oxide layer 82 as shown in figure 2c. Once the oxide layer 82 is penetrated by the filler wire 56, convective forces within the weld pool 80 ensure sufficient mixing of the molten sheet metal to achieve fusion. The filler wire 56 typically has a composition which is the same as that of the alloy sheets 72,74, for example a mixture of aluminium and magnesium or silicon. Once the filler wire 56 has been advanced into the weld pool 80, it is held there for a predetermined time to allow a portion thereof to melt and become incorporated in the

weld After said predetermined time has elapsed the filler wire 56 is retracted. The work piece 34 can then be unclamped and removed from the apparatus 10.

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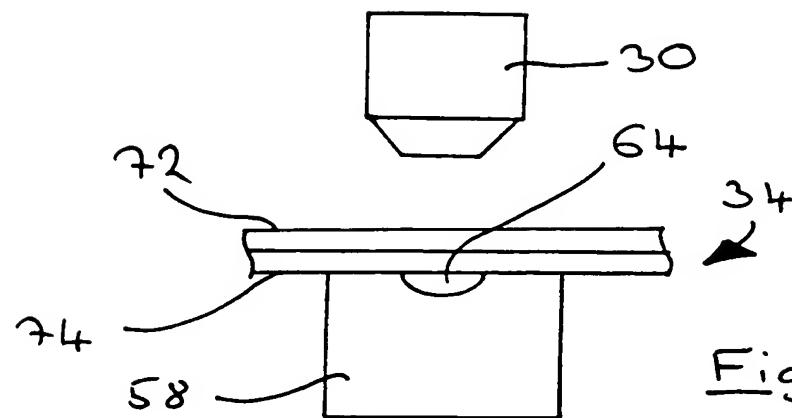


Fig. 2a

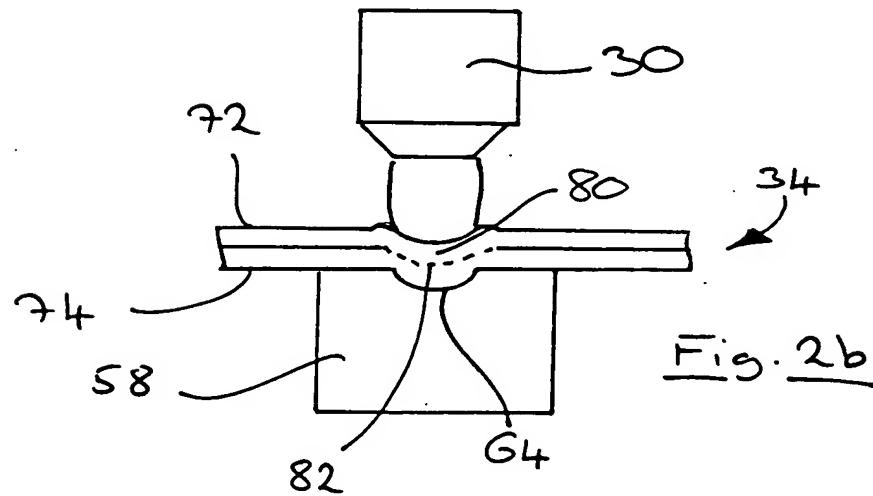


Fig. 2b

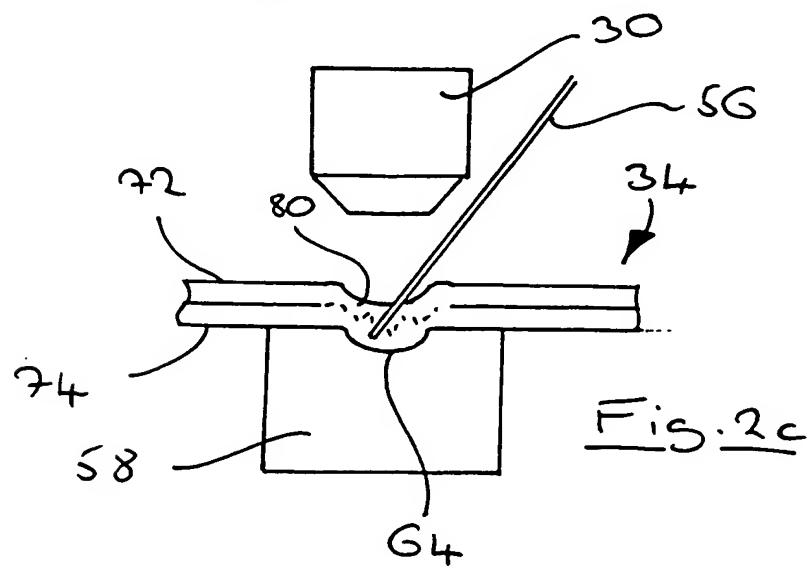


Fig. 2c

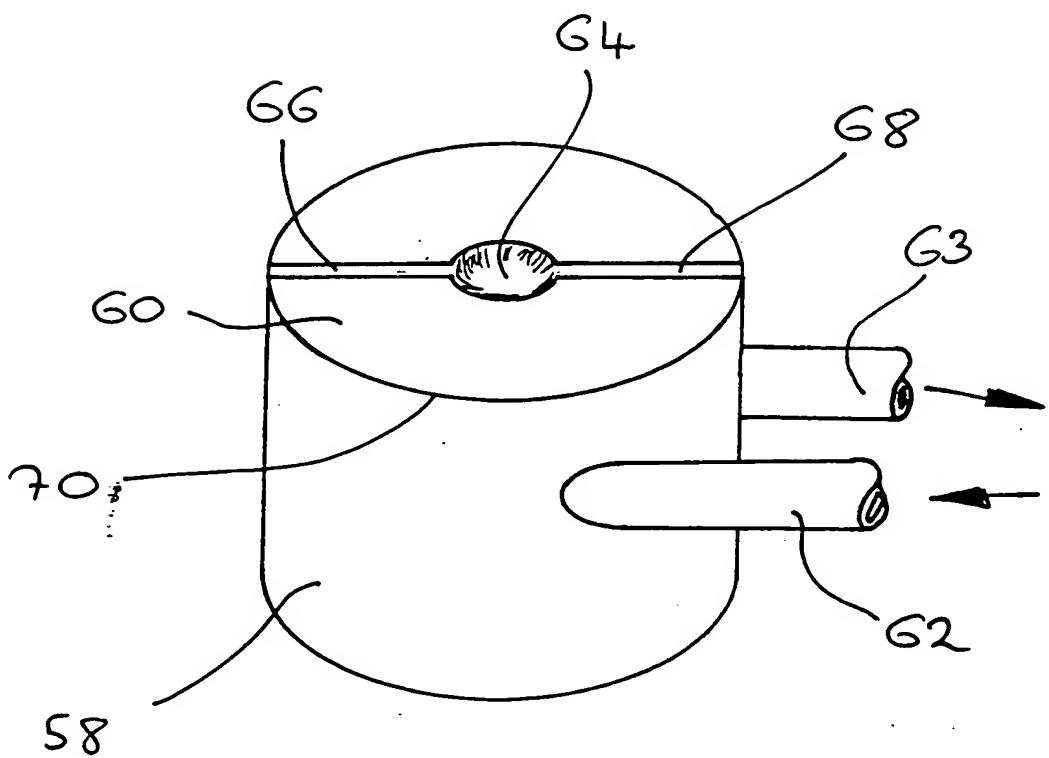


Fig. 3